

## Old Testament Authenticity

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### How Did the Old Testament Come Into Being?

Understanding what the Old Testament is and why we should study it are good beginning points for this systematic study. However, those things still don't answer another set of very important questions. Those things don't tell us how it, the Old Testament, came into being as the authoritative Word of God and why it should be accepted or believed as such. Answering those questions begins with an understanding of two different but related theological concepts; canonicity and inspiration.

Canonicity will be considered first. Canonicity is a theological term used to describe how the different books of the Bible came to be understood and accepted as the authoritative Word of God. It derives from the Greek word *kanon*, which means measuring rod or measuring stick. As a theological term canonicity has a double meaning. First it describes how those books that belong in the Bible serve as the authoritative measuring stick for faith and practice. In essence, people can look at what they believe and how they live and assess whether or not their lives and beliefs are in line with the Canon, the books of the Bible. Second, the term refers to the standard or measurement to which the books or writings themselves had to conform in order to be accepted as part of God's authoritative Word. Canonicity in this sense refers to the way the ancient Hebrews came to recognize which books were authoritative and which were not, that is, which belonged in the Tanach or the Old Testament and which did not. This latter meaning is the focus of this study.

One of the most important ways the ancient Hebrews recognized which books or writings belonged from those which did not was a *subjective* test. This idea tends to make us as modern readers uncomfortable, but it shouldn't. This subjective test is not the same as saying the ancient Hebrews had a special feeling about these books and selected them based upon that feeling. A better way to think about it is to understand that the ancient Hebrews recognized that these books or writings did something to them as God's people that other writings did not do. They recognized that these writings somehow imposed their authority on them as God's people. In that sense, it is more proper to say that these *books or writings proved themselves*. Biblical theologians have a word to describe this phenomenon. They say the books were *self-attesting*. Old Testament scholar Alec Motyer offers a helpful analogy to explain how these writings imposed their authority, that is, how they were self-attesting. He uses the example of a doctor prescribing a treatment for a patient with a diet problem. The doctor prescribes a list of likely foods and tells the patient to try them and discover for himself which foods might be helpful. After following the doctor's advice, the patient then later returns and presents the doctor with his shorter list of the foods which did help. In this example, it can be said that the patient did not so much choose the foods on the prescribed list. Rather, the foods chose him or imposed themselves on him by

proving their healing power in his life. In a similar manner, the thirty-nine books that form the Old Testament proved themselves to be authoritative among God's people.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that these writings proved themselves in the canonization process should not surprise us. However, as other theologians note, the subjective test was not the only criteria for determining the canonical status of a writing. *Objective* criteria that further attested to the authority of these writings were also used in the canonization process.<sup>2</sup> There were three categories of objective criteria that attested to the divine authority of these writings. These three categories were *authorship, audience, and teaching*. *Authorship* means the writings were written by or accurately reflected the teachings of a prophet or prophetically gifted person (2 Pet. 1:21). In listing authorship as one of the objective criteria, theologians are not saying that the author of each book or writing was always a recognized prophet or even always known. They are simply saying that when a writing was known to come from a recognized prophet like Moses or Jeremiah, then authorship gave it objective credibility. The second criterion, *audience*, refers to the fact that the writing would have to address and impact all succeeding generations of the community of God's people and not just the generation to whom it was originally given. This is the reason why the story of Abraham speaks to the contemporary church as much as it did to the Hebrew slaves living in Egypt in 1400 BCE. Of course, audience as an objective criterion would be proved over time and was not immediately applicable. Finally, the third objective criterion, *teaching*, affirmed that the content or teaching of the later writings would conform to that of the earlier writings of Scripture. In other words, the teachings of later writings like Isaiah or Ezra or even Paul would conform to and not contradict the earlier teachings of writings like Leviticus or Deuteronomy.

The subjective and objective tests for canonicity are important to understand. Taken together, they do make a compelling argument for how a writing or book came to be recognized as authoritative among the ancient Hebrews. However, they still do not tell us much about the process by which these writings not only came into being, but also came to be collected and formed into the Old Testament. Noted scholar and theologian Eugene Peterson refers to this part of the process of canonization as the process by which the spoken Word of God became the written Word of God.<sup>3</sup> That is a good starting point for understanding this aspect of the canonization process. The words that were written were first spoken ... and God was the speaker. The stories, the laws, the poems, and the songs that we read in the Old Testament today were first spoken by God to the ancient Hebrews. That is a very valuable thing to know. However, we must also recognize that, in light of the antiquity of these writings, we know little else about this process. That fact however is not at all discouraging when compared to how much less is known about how other ancient writings like the "Enuma Elish" or the "Code of Hammurabi" came into being. In fact, what we do know about the canonization process of the Old Testament looks quite impressive when compared to all the unknowns of these other ancient writings. For starters, we know that these Old Testament writings came from the ancient Hebrews living in the second millennium BCE. Another thing we know is that these sacred writings were composed or written over a time span of about a thousand years, roughly from 1450 to 450 BCE. And third, we know who some of the individuals among the Hebrew people were to whom God spoke these words, these stories and poems, these laws and covenants, that were later written down. For example, Moses probably wrote much of what is called the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament (Ex. 24:3); and Joshua probably wrote most of the book bearing his name (Joshua 24:26). Later others who usually fulfilled the office of prophet wrote additional words, stories, and sermons from God. Some of these persons are well known, Samuel (1 Sam. 10:25), Nathan

1 Alec Motyer, *The Story of the Old Testament: Men with a Message* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 14.

2 Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 19.

3 Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 107–111.

(1 Chron. 29:29), Isaiah (2 Chron. 26:22), and Jeremiah (Jer. 30:2). Many of the individual writers however are not known.

According to some scholars, this aspect of the process of canonization in which the spoken word became the written word occurred in two overlapping phases; the composition phase and the editing phase. The earliest phase, the composition phase, began when the original writings, called autographs, started to be collected.<sup>4</sup> According to tradition, this composition phase of the Old Testament Canon began during the middle of the second millennium BCE after God had delivered the Hebrew people from their oppressive enslavement to the Egyptians. God then led the Hebrews to Mt. Sinai where he spoke directly to Moses giving him a set of instructions called the *Decalogue* (the Ten Commandments). He then instructed Moses to put the words into writing for future generations (Ex. 24:3). Apparently, this was the point in history when the idea of putting God's spoken word into writing for future generations became a common practice with the Hebrew people (Deut. 31:9, Josh. 24:25, 1Sam. 10:25).

In the beginning of the composition phase the collected writings were stored at the Tabernacle in what was called the Covenant Box or Ark. Later, as the collection of writings grew, the different writings or books began to be grouped into three different sections. These three sections were called the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. However, the collecting and grouping of these books into sections did not signify that the composition phase was complete. In fact, conservative scholars such as John Sailhamer suggest that the second phase in this aspect of the canonization process, the editing phase, began not long after the composition phase began. According to these scholars, not long after the death of Moses, Joshua, the successor of Moses, began the editing phase by adding some editorial comments to some of the writings of Moses. The death of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 34: 5–12 is considered one of the earliest examples of the editing phase.<sup>5</sup> This example demonstrates the early overlapping of the editing phase with the composition phase. Long before the composition phase was complete, the editing and updating of the earlier writings under the guidance of the Holy Spirit was apparently one of the ways God worked to give this story to his people.

Understanding some of the dynamics of the composition phase and the editing phase as part of the process of canonization does help demonstrate the authenticity and reliability of the Old Testament. Yet there is something else that needs to be included that further affirms the authenticity of this book. It is what Old Testament scholars call the sequencing of the Old Testament Canon. Sequencing simply refers to the order or sequence in which the individual books were accepted into the Canon. As mentioned earlier, the Hebrews began to group the collected writings into three sections called the *Torah*, the *Prophets*, and the *Writings*. The bulk of the writings of the first section of the Old Testament, the *Torah*, was collected during the time of Moses (between 1450 and 1275 BCE). After the Mosaic period, other divinely inspired books were added to the Old Testament Canon as they were written. The writings that began to be composed and collected shortly after the Mosaic period were grouped into a section called the *Prophets*. The writings for this section of the Old Testament continued to be composed, collected, and edited until 450 BCE. The Hebrew people later divided this section into two parts. The first part they called the Former Prophets (Joshua–Kings), and the second part they called the Latter Prophets (Isaiah–Malachi). These books covered the historical period from the conquest of Canaan to the return from the Babylonian captivity and focused on the faithfulness of God to his covenant with his people. The final editing of the Former Prophets probably took place soon after the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE and the final editing of the Latter Prophets probably occurred around 450 BCE (after the return from exile). The last section of the Old Testament, called the *Writings*, is a bit more complex and consequently difficult to date. Many scholars believe the Psalms and the Proverbs were the first of the Writings

4 John H. Sailhamer, *How We Got the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 15.

5 *Ibid.*, 16.

to be collected and this began during the Davidic/Solomonic reign (@ 1000). Most of the other writings seem to have been collected after the Exile, that is, after 550 BCE. Just as the books in the Prophets section complimented the Torah by focusing on the faithfulness of God to his covenant with his people, the books in this section, the *Writings*, also complimented the Torah by describing how God's people expressed their commitment to God's covenant in their daily lives.

The value of understanding the historical sequencing of the writings in relation to this aspect of the canonization process of the Old Testament is that it allows us to see how the later writings in affirmed the continued authority of the earlier writings among the Hebrew people. The later writings do this by making repeated references to the earlier writings. For example, there are hundreds of allusions to Leviticus and Deuteronomy in the books of the *Latter Prophets* that give strong testimony of how these earlier writings in the *Torah* continued to be received and recognized as authoritative by later generations of the Hebrew people. Another example of this internal testimony is found in the book of Daniel, a book grouped in the *Writings* section and composed after the sixth century BCE. The writer of this book makes reference to the earlier books of the *Latter Prophets* (Daniel 9:2) as evidence of their canonical status among the Hebrew people. But maybe even more importantly, the testimony of the Hebrew community does not stop when the final editing of the Old Testament comes to a close. Later, after the close of the Old Testament Canon, reference is made in Jewish non-canonical writings like 2 Maccabees 2:13 that attest to the canonical status of some of the latest Old Testament writings like Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>6</sup> In essence, we have strong testimony from the Hebrew community living between the end of the Old Testament period and the beginning of the New Testament period itself of their acceptance of the canonical status of the books of the *Torah (Law)*, *the Prophets*, and *the Writings*.

The fact that the ancient Hebrew community affirmed the canonization of those writings that the Christian community today accepts as the Old Testament should not surprise us. After all, the combined testimony of the New Testament writers, by extensively quoting from every one of the Old Testament books except for Esther, further affirms the canonical status of these writings. Finally, and perhaps more importantly for the Christian church, Jesus Christ reveals his own attitude toward the Old Testament, stating emphatically its authoritative status (Mt. 5:18 and John 10:35). Moreover, he not only quoted and taught from the Old Testament in his public ministry (Mt. 4), but also viewed his life and ministry as the fulfillment of it (Mt. 26:54). For me personally, knowing that the Old Testament writings that the Christian church recognizes today as the authoritative Word of God were the very same writings that Jesus and the New Testament writers recognized as the authoritative Word of God adds further confidence to the canonization process. Thus the testimony of the ancient Hebrew community,<sup>7</sup> together with the testimony of Jesus Christ and all of the writers of the New Testament to the canonization of the Old Testament puts the Christian community on solid ground in its acceptance of the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God.

## Why Do We Believe These Books Are Inspired?

A better understanding of canonicity, that is, a better understanding of the process by which the books of the Old Testament came to be accepted as the authoritative Word of God does give us confidence about its authenticity. Nevertheless, an understanding of canonicity still does not answer the question of the divine inspiration of the Old Testament. In essence, we need to ask ourselves why we believe these books that form the Old Testament are inspired. After all, other religions make the same claim for their sacred writings. Islam

<sup>6</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 25–27.

<sup>7</sup> Arnold and Beyer, 27. These scholars point out that the Jewish community of the first century further affirmed the canonization of the thirty-nine books we accept as the Old Testament at the meeting of the Council of Jamnia. This leaves little doubt that the Old Testament that you and I read is the very same one that Jesus and the Apostles read as God's Word.

claims the “Koran” is inspired, Mormons claim the “Book of Mormon” is inspired, and the list goes on. Before trying to answer that question, we need to understand what inspiration means. “Inspiration” is a biblical-theological term that literally means “God-breathed” or “God-uttered” (2Tim. 3:16). The words, the stories, the songs, and the laws that make up the books of the Old Testament were breathed by or spoken by God. Several theories of inspiration have been proposed over the years to try to explain just how God spoke to or inspired the writers. Probably the one that enjoys much of the support of church history and continues to be the most popular, at least among the theologically conservative branch of the Church, is called the plenary verbal inspiration theory. This theory claims that God inspired both the words and the thoughts of the writers. Of course it goes without saying that inspiring the words and thoughts would include inspiring the very literary forms or genres that were employed by the writers. In essence, the words, the ideas, and the literary forms originated with God, not humans (1Pet. 1:21). Now, this does not mean that God audibly spoke these words, these ideas, and these literary forms in some mechanical format and that the Old Testament writers, like dutiful secretaries, wrote them down! Rather, what they actually mean is that God so directed the process that the writers wrote the very things in the very format in which they were “inspired” to write (1 Cor. 2:13).

While biblical scholars will note several different ways that God inspired the authors to write what they did, these different ways can be reduced to two broad categories. The first broad category can be called ordinary means of inspiration and the second can be called extraordinary means of inspiration.<sup>8</sup> These two means can be understood as follows.

1. *God inspired the writers through ordinary means*
  - a. God spoke indirectly to the authors by inspiring them to write about things they researched and knew about. This research, while superintended by God’s Spirit, included things like speaking to eyewitnesses, consulting official and legal records, and gathering information that was passed from one generation to the next (Joshua 10:13, 1 Kings 14:15)
  - b. God spoke indirectly to the authors by inspiring them with ideas that they gleaned from observing creation and ordinary life experiences that they then wrote down in their own words (Prov. 24:30–34)
  - c. God spoke indirectly to the authors by inspiring them to expand and edit earlier writings (Josh. 25:25–26, Prov. 25:1).
2. *God inspired the writers through extraordinary means:*
  - a. God spoke directly to the writers in an audible voice, in visions, in dreams, and/or in appearances (Dan. 1:17, Nu. 12:6–8).

Now, as interesting as it is to understand how God inspired humans to hear his spoken word and put it into writing, it still does not prove its divine inspiration. In essence, we still have not answered the question of why we believe these writings are inspired. The honest answer is that we as modern readers cannot determine which writings are inspired any more than the ancient Hebrews could determine which writings were authoritative. However, that does not mean that modern readers of the Old Testament (and the New Testament) cannot come to believe that these writings are the inspired Word of God. Just as God used subjective and objective criteria to convince the ancient Hebrews which books were authoritative, so he uses subjective and objective criteria to convince modern readers to believe that the Old Testament (along with the New Testament) is his inspired Word. As we earlier saw, the phrase theologians use to describe God’s activity of proving these writings to be not only authoritative but also to be inspired is “self-attesting.” These books attest to or prove themselves to be the “inspired” Word of God.

8 Edwin Lutzer, *Seven Reasons Why You Can Trust the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2008).

So, the real question is how do these books or writings attest to their divine inspiration? Well, since this question has been around for such a long time, church tradition has become pretty adept at answering it. The answer is holistic in nature, that is, it is both reasonable and experiential and can be summarized in four general arguments. These four arguments are the unity or continuity of the Old Testament story, the historical reliability of the Old Testament story, the fulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament, and the personal experience of the truthfulness of the Old Testament.

The first argument is that of the unity or continuity of the Old Testament story. As stated earlier, the Old Testament is a collection of thirty-nine books written over a period of approximately one thousand years by well over twenty different authors separated from one another by time, circumstances, and culture. This simply means that not only were they not able to conspire with one another to make sure their writings fit together, but also that most of these authors never even knew one another. In spite of these many differences, the Old Testament itself presents a unified story built around a single theme: “God’s covenant commitment to redeem and restore a lost and broken world through his people, Israel” (Genesis 12:1–3). To those who read and listen to this story, this unity and continuity will not only seem extraordinary, and even miraculous, but will also suggest a single mind behind the entire writing process. And that is the reason Christian tradition claims that the unity and continuity of this story point to divine inspiration.

A second way these writings attest to their inspiration is what is called the argument of historical reliability. Historical reliability means that the information and details contained in the writings themselves accurately reflect the historical context in which the story is said to occur. This kind of phenomenon is often referred to as “eye-witness accounts” because the kinds of story details such as people names, slave prices, business practices, cultural customs and beliefs, and social and familial relationships could only be accurately reflected by a person who participated in or was present when the story actually occurred. For instance, for the Patriarchal stories to be historically reliable, the very kinds of story details mentioned above would have to accurately reflect the historical period of the Ancient Near East between 2000–1700 BCE. Moreover, these kinds of story details would have to be recorded by someone living at that time simply because someone living two or three hundred years later would not know this kind of common but detailed information. Over the past one hundred fifty years, archeological research as a whole has tended to illuminate and confirm the historical reliability of the Old Testament story rather than contradict it.<sup>9</sup> A few examples of the types of corroborating evidence that affirms the historical reliability of the Old Testament story include the following:

1. The patriarchal family names of Nahor, Terah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Esau were common during the patriarchal period (2000–1700 BCE) but were not common prior to this period and were nearly non-existent after 1500 BCE.<sup>10</sup> This is important because names are often used as a means to affirm historical reliability. Think about popular names in American culture. A hundred years ago, popular names for women included Ethel, Myrtle, Inez, Gertrude, and Nora Lee. Finding a family in American culture with the female members bearing those names would not have been difficult a hundred years ago, but today, it would be virtually impossible. The same could be said for the male names of the patriarchal family living at the beginning of the second millennium BCE. Finding a family in the Ancient Near East with that combination of male names mentioned above would only fit the historical period that the Old Testament story puts them in.

9 Ibid., 68.

10 Kaiser, 88.

2. The treaties made by Abraham, Isaac, and later Joseph are of the same structure and style as those presented by their secular counterparts during the early centuries of the second millennium BCE. Again prior to 2000 BCE and after 1500 BCE, this structure of treaty was radically different.<sup>11</sup>
3. The military skirmishes recorded in Genesis 14 that lists the conquered chieftains or kings from the Mesopotamian region not only fit the geopolitical climate of this period of history in the Ancient Near East, but also the chieftains names recorded in this story were names common to this era but not common after this period. Again, this kind of exacting detail would have to be reported by someone from this same time period.<sup>12</sup>
4. The selling price of a slave (Joseph) recorded in Genesis 37 fits the going price of male slaves sold in the eighteenth century BCE, which happens to be when the story of Joseph occurred. Once again, slave prices in the preceding and succeeding centuries differed greatly from this, but someone living several centuries after this story occurred would have no idea what the selling price for a male slave was at that particular time.<sup>13</sup>

These are only a few examples but even these begin to paint a picture of a historically reliable text. Noted archeologist Kenneth Kitchen in his seminal work, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, concludes that archeology has overwhelmingly confirmed the historical reliability of the Old Testament.

A third way that Christians have noted that these writings attest to their inspiration is the remarkable number of fulfilled prophecies that they contain. Scripture itself claims that fulfilled prophecy is one of the ways that people can know if the prophet's message is actually coming from God (Jeremiah 28:9, Deuteronomy 18:21–22). In that sense, God is telling us that fulfilled prophecy points to the inspiration and truthfulness of his Word. There are various kinds of prophecies in the Old Testament attesting to its inspiration (i.e., the destruction of Israel, the destruction of Judah, the fall of Nineveh, etc.), but one specific group that has always held special interest to the Christian community has more than thirty prophecies that pertain to the coming of the Messiah. Jesus himself makes reference to these prophecies during his earthly ministry (Luke 24:25–27). A few of these messianic prophecies are:

1. Micah 5:2 which is the famous prophecy foretelling the birthplace of the Messiah in Bethlehem and was fulfilled when Joseph and Mary left Galilee and went to Bethlehem where Jesus was born (Luke 2:4–7);
2. Jeremiah 31:15 which prophecies the slaughtering of the innocent children of Bethlehem by King Herod at the time of Jesus' birth (Matthew 2:16–8);
3. Malachi 3:1 tells of the forerunner who would precede the arrival of the Messiah was fulfilled by John the Baptist whose ministry prepared the way for Jesus' own public ministry (Luke 7:24–27);
4. Isaiah 52:13–53:12 which tells of the Messiah's life, his rejection in ministry, and his death as a vicarious sacrifice was fulfilled in the life, ministry and death by crucifixion of Jesus Christ (John 1:11, Romans 5:6–8).

While these are but a few of the many prophecies in the Old Testament that have been fulfilled, the cumulative force of these fulfilled prophecies is undeniable and does what God said they would do, strongly bear witness to the supernatural inspiration of his Old Testament *Word*.

A fourth way the Old Testament writings attest to their inspiration is what is often referred to as subjective experience. Throughout the Old Testament period, God invited his people to taste for themselves, to

11 K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 323–324.

12 Kaiser, 90–92.

13 Kitchen, 344.

experience for themselves the goodness and truthfulness of his word (Psalm 34:8. 119:103). Experiencing for themselves the goodness and truthfulness of God's word was not only convincing evidence for God's people, but, as Moses reminded the Hebrew people gathered on the Plains of Moab just prior to entering the Promised Land, convincing evidence for the unbelieving nations who would come into contact with them (Deuteronomy 4:5–9). And for us today, this invitation from God to experience him and his goodness in this Old Testament story continues to be a powerful indication of its inspiration. This is the reason Christian tradition has referred to the writings of the Old and New Testament as a living word, a word that breathes. Like they did for the Hebrews of old, and like they have done for Christians over the past two millennia, these writings continue to prove their divine inspiration and truthfulness as they breathe new life into us. As we learn to listen and enter into this story, we too experience God's intimate presence and transforming grace in such a way that leaves little doubt as to its divine inspiration.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Chapter 2: Old Testament Authenticity STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is canonicity?
2. What was the subjective test that helped the ancient Hebrews recognize which writings were to be canonized?
3. What were the objective tests that helped the ancient Hebrews recognize which writings were to be canonized?
4. What is inspiration, and what are some of the things that help us recognize the inspiration of the Old Testament?

